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VII.—*The Battle of Mons Graupius.*

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The battle in which, after a resistance of many years, the people of northern Britain were finally defeated and the subjugation of the island was completed, is described by Tacitus in the 35th, 36th, and 37th chapters of his *Life of Agricola*; a splendid piece of narrative, which is said to have inspired Milton in one of his most famous descriptions. The account of this battle is no doubt the most perplexing passage in the work in which it is contained, its inherent difficulties being increased by the uncertainties and corruption of the text. Not feeling entirely satisfied with the explanation given to this passage in any of the commentaries with which I am acquainted, I have thought that the difficulties arose largely from a failure to comprehend the operations of the battle as a whole: and that the successive points of detail in these operations could be best understood, and especially that the uncertainties of the text could be best cleared up, from the point of view of the military operations. My aim, in the present paper, is to obtain a clear and consecutive notion of the operations of the battle, and incidentally to discuss the successive questions of text and commentary as they arise.

First a word as to the locality of the battle. It was observed by Wex that the manuscript reading, Chap. 29, is not *ad montem Grampium*, but *Graupium*; it was by some error on the part of the early editors that the more familiar name made its way into the text. But Wex did not know that the familiar name finds as little support in Scotch geography, as in Latin manuscripts. The "Grampian Hills" of our modern maps, of Scotch tourists, and of the friend of our youth, Norval, are wholly a modern invention. The name does not occur before the fifteenth century, and appears to have been adopted from an erroneous reading of Tacitus' *Agricola*. But even supposing that the name were a genuine one, and were

found in the manuscripts, we could not identify it with the "Grampian Hills." It would be hard to believe that Agricola carried his troops more than fifty miles in a straight line from his base of operations upon the Frith of Forth, into the savage and barbarous Highlands; even so great a general as Agricola could hardly have escaped a defeat as signal as that of Varus had been, or as that which was sustained sixteen hundred years later on the same ground, in the fatal field of Killiecrankie. It should be remarked, further, that this hill *quem jam hostis insederat* cannot readily be understood to be a range, like the Grampians, but a detached hill or ridge. Moreover, it is certain from the narrative in the twenty-ninth chapter that the Roman commander did not march inland, but along the coast; this follows necessarily from the words "*praemissa classe, quae pluribus locis praedata magnum et incertum terrorem faceret.*" Most certainly this fleet did not ascend the Tay to the Grampian mountains. The Graupian mount of Tacitus must therefore in all probability have been in Fifeshire, not very far from the northern coast of the Frith of Forth.

The account of the battle begins in the thirty-fifth chapter, with a description of the arrangement of the Roman troops, followed by that of the Caledonians. The order of the Roman troops presents no difficulties until we reach an allusion at the close of the chapter. Agricola, like a thrifty husbandman, kept his legions, consisting of Roman troops, entirely in reserve; and, as we shall see, they took no part in the battle whatever. The whole brunt of the battle was thrown upon the auxiliaries—eight thousand infantry, composing the main line, with three thousand cavalry upon the wings. The order of the Britons, on the other hand, is less certain, and is a matter of a good deal of importance. They occupied higher ground, the front rank being upon the level ground, *aequo*, the other ranks rising gradually up the slope. The cavalry, instead of being stationed upon the wings, like that of the Romans, occupied the level ground between the two armies. Here we find the first point of difficulty; the text reads *media campi covinnarius eques strepitu ac discursu complebat*. This

reading is retained by most of the best editors—Kritz, Halm, Dräger, Church and Brodribb—and is explained to mean that the war-chariots (*covinnarius*) were a kind of cavalry. They certainly may be so regarded, but we know from Caesar that the Britons had cavalry as well as war-chariots, and the two arms are carefully distinguished by him: B. G. iv. 24, *equitatu et essedariis*; iv. 32, *equitatu atque essedis*; v. 15, *equites hostium essedariique*. And it would be very strange if in this important battle they used no cavalry except these clumsy war-chariots. We shall find, moreover, when we come to the operations of the battle in the next chapter, that the account is much simpler and clearer if we suppose there were both cavalry and war-chariots in the ranks of the Britons. I prefer, therefore, in this passage to follow the older editions and insert *et* between *covinnarius* and *eques*. A simple emendation here will preclude the necessity of a more extensive emendation further on.

The armies being thus drawn up, Agricola, seeing that the enemy largely outnumbered him, and fearing to be outflanked, had his choice of two alternatives. His officers advised him to bring up the legions; he held, however, to his determination, to keep these in reserve, and preferred to extend his line, at the risk of making it too thin and weak, and thus exposing it to an attack on the flank. The expression used here is, in the manuscripts, *simul in frontem simul et latera*, a harsh expression at best, and hardly grammatical. It is usually corrected by omitting the first *simul*, so as to read *in frontem simul et latera*, a perfectly good expression. I will suggest that a simpler emendation would be to change *et* into *ad*, a quite common change, in which case we should read *simul in frontem simul ad latera*.

There is one more difficulty in this chapter, where Agricola is said, after dismissing his horse, to have taken his stand *pedes ante vexilla*. What were the *vexilla* here referred to? Both Kritz, and Church and Brodribb explain them as being the same as the *legionum vexilla* in the eighteenth chapter; that is, detached bodies of legionary troops. Such detached bodies, it is well known, were placed under a *praefectus*, and

were provided with a *vexillum*, or cloth standard, leaving their *signa*, or metal standards, with the legion. Church and Brodrigg add that among the *peditum auxilia*, composing the main line, "would be several bodies of troops, termed *vexilla*;" forgetting that the *vexilla* were legionary troops, and that Tacitus has said that this line was composed of auxiliaries only. I cannot think, therefore, that this explanation is correct; at the same time I cannot present any other explanation with confidence, because I have not been able to find any authority as to the use of the *vexillum* by the auxiliaries. I cannot help thinking, however, that the *vexilla* here mentioned were simply the standards of the auxiliaries, as *signa* were the standards of the legion. Even supposing that there were detached bodies of legionary troops mixed in with the auxiliaries, I can see no reason why the general should have stood directly in front of these; but it is wholly credible that a commander like Agricola placed himself in front of the standards of his main line, themselves being placed somewhat in advance of the line. The matter is of no practical importance in the interpretation of the passage. In either case the substance is the same, that Agricola took his stand in front of his troops to lead them into battle.

The battle began (see chapter 36) *eminus*, with a throwing of missiles on both sides. In this the Britons evidently had the best of it, being easily able with their great broadswords and small bucklers to ward off the Roman missiles, while they themselves showered an abundance upon the Romans. Agricola, seeing this, hastened to have recourse to the genuine Roman method of fighting *cominus*: "The race that shortens its weapons lengthens its boundaries," says the Autocrat of the Breakfast Table. Agricola sent in his Batavian cohorts and two cohorts of Tungrians, who soon changed the face of things. For the enormous swords of the Britons, having no point, are not suited to fighting *in aperto*, say the manuscripts; but most editors with good reason change *aperto* to *arto*: fighting "in the open," *in aperto*, is just what the broadsword is fit for; but it is not suited to close quarters, *in arto*. The Caledonian infantry were therefore soon routed, and the

Roman cohorts (it should be observed that the auxiliary *cohorts* are here as elsewhere clearly distinguished from the Roman *legions*) pushed up the hill after them.

So far the account of the battle has presented no serious difficulties, and the course of the operations is simple and intelligible. But now follows a passage of great difficulty. In the rest of the chapter the reading of the manuscripts is very corrupt, and in many places must be emended in order to give any meaning at all.

It begins: *Interim equitum turmae fugē: covinnarii peditum se proelio miscuere; et quamquam recentem terrorem intulerant, densis tamen hostium agmēnibus et inaequalibus locis haerebant.*

The first question that arises is: what were these *equitum turmae*?

The word *turma* is the most general one for divisions of cavalry; it is used for the cavalry of the early Roman legion, for subdivisions of the *alae* or large bodies of auxiliary cavalry, and for the cavalry of foreign or barbarous nations. The word *ala*, on the other hand, has a fixed signification, being applied to the cavalry of the auxiliaries in the Roman army. It is never used for any other bodies of cavalry, and is regularly, if not invariably, used for these. It has therefore as distinct and technical a meaning for auxiliary cavalry as *cohortes* for auxiliary infantry. Now most editors take these *equitum turmae* to be the three thousand auxiliaries who stood upon the wings of Agricola's army; and this is certainly possible, inasmuch as these auxiliaries must have been divided into *turmae*. But it is almost certain that they would have been spoken of as *alae*, as we shall see is the case in the next chapter. Moreover the reading is *equitum turmae fugere*; and as Agricola's cavalry certainly did not run away, the editors who take the *equitum turmae* to have belonged to the Roman army (among them Halm, Kritz, and Dräger) insert *ut* before *fugere*, and change the punctuation, so that the passage reads: *interim equitum turmae, ut fugere covinnarii, peditum se proelio miscuere*: "the Roman cavalry, after the flight of the war-chariots, mingled in the infantry battle." It is an objection to this, although perhaps in itself not a

very strong argument, that it assumes, without saying, that the war-chariots as well as the infantry had been repulsed. This is certainly not impossible ; I prefer, however, the reading of the text, as on the whole, without any emendation, presenting a more natural order of operations. As I have said above, it seems probable that the Britons had cavalry as well as war-chariots, *covinnarii et eques* ; the insertion of *et* in this passage makes it unnecessary to change the passage now under consideration, and the *equitum turmae* as well as the *covinnarii* may be referred to the Britons. I interpret the passage to mean that the British cavalry were repulsed, while the war-chariots mixed themselves in the infantry battle. By this they at first partly restored the day, *recentem terrorem intulerant*, but were soon brought to a stand, *haerebant*, on the uneven ground closely crowded with the ranks of their own men, called by Tacitus, from his point of view, *hostium*.

This view appears to take no note of the cavalry of the Romans, who can hardly be supposed to have been inactive ; and probably a portion of the cavalry had already joined the infantry in the pursuit of the retreating Britons. But the greater part of the cavalry, as we learn from the next chapter, were still held in reserve. The *ala* of cavalry consisted of either 480 or 960 men ; the three thousand cavalry, therefore, mentioned in the preceding chapter, composed at most six *alae*. Now in Chap. 37 we find mention of four *alae*, which had been held in reserve for emergencies ; not more than a third of the cavalry could therefore have been engaged up to this time. This is a strong argument against considering the *equitum turmae* to have been Roman ; there would have been some restricting or defining expression, if it had referred to only one third of the body. A still more decisive objection is that the course of the battle as depicted by the reading adopted by Halm, Kritz, and Dräger makes the Romans to have been worsted at this point, while the sequence shows that this was not the case. Church and Brodribb retain the reading of the manuscripts, giving it the interpretation that I have done. But at the same time they retain the manuscript reading *covinnarius eques*, and thus make no provision for Caledonian

cavalry. It seems to me indispensable either to insert an *et* in the one place or an *ut* in the other.

The condition of things, therefore, at this point, seems to be as follows. A hard infantry battle is going on upon the slope of the hill, the war-chariots attempting ineffectually to support the infantry of their countrymen; the cavalry of the Britons has disappeared, while a part of the Roman cavalry must be understood to have accompanied the infantry directly into the fight. Now follows a very corrupt and perplexing passage: *miêque equestres ea enim pugnae facies erat, cum egra diu aut stante simul equorum corporibus impellerentur*. These words, taken by themselves, are wholly unintelligible. The difficulties lie chiefly in *equestres* and *diu*, which have been emended respectively into *aequa nostris* and *clivo*. I can see no reason for the first change. The rest of this chapter is occupied with a description of the confusion caused by empty chariots and riderless horses, and the next chapter begins with an attempt of the Britons to take the victorious Romans in the rear. Evidently the battle was not *minime aequa nostris* at this juncture, and although I cannot suggest any entirely satisfactory expression of this hopelessly corrupt passage, yet it seems to me that it was the most natural thing in the world for Tacitus to say, as Livy does of the battle of Cannae,* that the look of the battle was not that of a cavalry engagement. The war-chariots on one side, and the three thousand cavalry on the other, were in full action; but they were so intermixed and confused with the infantry, that the writer only goes on to describe this confusion—*equorum corporibus impellerentur*—*vagi currus*—*exterriti sine rectoribus equi*—*transversos aut obvios incursabant*. The other emendation, *clivo* for *diu*, seems every way good; only I should read with Halm and Dräger, *adstantes* (for *aut stante*), rather than *instantes* with Kritz. *Adstantes* not merely resembles more nearly the manuscript reading, but is the proper word to use for the Britons (see *adstiterant*, a few lines above), while *instantes* would naturally apply to the Romans making their way up the hill.

* Book xxii. ch. 47, *minime equestris more pugnae*.

The thirty-seventh chapter begins with an attempt of certain British forces which had up to this time taken no part in the battle, to take the Romans in the rear, *circumire terga vincen-tium coeperunt*; and this expression, showing that the Romans still had the better of their antagonists, completely disproves Kritz' reading *minime aequa*, with his interpretation of the previous words, referring the check in the words *haerebant* to the Roman cavalry. Agricola met this aggressive movement by bringing up four *alae* of cavalry which had until now been held in reserve; auxiliary cavalry of course, inasmuch as the term *ala* is confined to divisions of auxiliary cavalry. The mention of this reserve of four *alae* implies that the rest of this cavalry was already engaged, as I have assumed. It also serves to support the opinion already expressed that the *equitum turmae* were British; the word *alae* would probably have been used had it been the Roman cavalry. Not merely were the advancing Britons repulsed, but the fresh cavalry were themselves carried round to the enemies' rear, *aversam hostium aciem invasere*.

The description of the slaughter which followed is in the picturesque style characteristic of Tacitus, but calls for no special remark. The enemy appears to have been steadily pushed up the hill until they reached a piece of woods which has not been mentioned before, where they again made a stand, and gained some advantages by their familiarity with the ground. And again Agricola called up fresh troops, this time infantry, *validas et expeditas cohortes*, who searched the woods in conjunction with mounted and dismounted cavalry. These fresh troops must also have been auxiliaries. It is true the word *cohortes* is not decisive, although this is the term regularly used for the auxiliary infantry, in contrast with the Roman legions; for the legions too were divided into cohorts, just as the *alae* were divided into *turmae*. But if it had been detachments from the legions, the word *manipulos* would have been more likely to be used, and at any rate the statement that they were light-armed, *expeditas*, proves that they were auxiliaries; for the Roman legion contained at this period no light-armed soldiers. The same thing is proved by the fact that the officer

killed in this engagement, Aulus Atticus, is called *praefectus cohortis*; the term *praefectus* is never used for a legionary officer. This movement finally brought the resistance to an end; the British lines broke and fled, and the conquest of Britain was complete.

It appears, if this sketch is correct, that the battle was fought by Agricola wholly with his front line, of auxiliaries; the legionary soldiers not being brought into the engagement at all. It appears further that there was never any serious check—except, indeed, at the very beginning of the contest—and never any actual repulse. The battle nevertheless was in three distinct stages, or rather presented three distinct crises. First, when the fighting *eminus* proved ineffectual, a charge of Batavians and Tungrians was ordered, followed no doubt by a portion of the cavalry; the fighting was then upon the hill-side, confused and disorderly, especially by reason of the presence of the war-chariots. The second crisis was the attempt of the Caledonians to take the Romans in the rear; this was frustrated by the prompt bringing up of divisions of cavalry, which themselves came round upon the rear of the enemy, and effected a general slaughter. The third was the fight in the woods, determined likewise by the commander bringing up fresh troops, with which the victory was secured.
